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Columbia University Libraries Research Grant  
2012-13

### **Grant Progress Report**

My research at the Columbia University Libraries has drawn me into the world of twentieth-century New York City “loan sharks” and the poor borrowers they served.

I have found many stories of working-class households who borrowed small sums of money in the records the New York Charity Organization Society, part of the Community Service Society collection housed in Columbia’s Rare Book library. The CSS collection contains over a thousand casework files documenting the Society’s dealings with individual families, includes a subset of cases in which it is apparent that the household “under care” requested and received a loan from the Society. The Society records provide extraordinarily detailed information about the daily lives of the loan recipients, and their struggles with non-philanthropic credit providers. They also reveal the Society’s involvement with the anti-loan shark campaign.

I have also discovered battles between lenders and reformers, described in the pages of the Legal Aid Society’s annual reports, housed in Butler and Avery libraries. The credit problems of the poor were a frequent subject of concern for LAS attorneys. The annual reports describe elaborate schemes that lenders devised to evade New York usury laws, and the Society’s work to close these legal loopholes.

The records of the lenders themselves show another side of this history. After they formed a national trade association in 1916, licensed lenders joined the side of the reformers and began lobbying for passage of the Uniform Small Loan Law. I have reviewed many years’ worth of newsletters published by the American Association of Licensed Lenders to trace lenders’ evolving attitudes towards regulation and their relationship to state authorities.

At the upcoming Business History Conference in Columbus, Ohio, I will present a conference

paper that draws on my research at Columbia Libraries. The paper, entitled “The ‘Very Fibre of Personal Finance’: Changing Beliefs about Regulation and the Small-Sum Lending Industry in New York, 1900-1940,” argues that lenders’ attitudes towards consumer credit regulation changed over time, leading to unexpected alliances. Although lenders initially viewed law as an obstacle to overcome, many lenders eventually came to see regulation as a boon to their business. They joined reformers, including charity workers and legal aid attorneys, in their push to enact new measures to regulate the small-sum lending industry. By the early 1930s, industry leaders deemed legal constraints “the very breath of life to our business.” Belief in the benefits of regulation had become “woven into the very fibre of personal finance,” in the words of one lending association leader.

At present, I am also continuing to work my way through the papers of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Mobilization for Youth, the Union Settlement, and Lillian Wald. These records, all housed in Columbia’s Rare Book library, primarily concern the post-World War II period, which I will discuss in the later chapters of my dissertation. The materials I have reviewed to date reveal that consumer issues continued to be a significant concern for poor families and social service organizations in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. As buying goods on credit was becoming increasingly common for middle-class households, reformers and legislators had to decide whether (and how) to help low-income New Yorkers gain access to sale financing on the same terms as the middle class. From these records, I hope to learn more, in particular, about how the federal government sought to address the consumer problems of poor households through War on Poverty programs.